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Developments in Indochina

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25X1

127

5 March 1973

Page Denied

25X1

5 March 1973

DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA*(Information as of 1500)*

	<u>Page</u>
SOUTH VIETNAM	1
President Thieu orders better protection for truce teams. More fighting may be in store in the central highlands. Both Bao Dai and Big Minh seem interested in a role in the "third force."	1
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS	4
Eighteen foreign ships have now departed Haiphong.	
LAOS	5
Only minor clashes are reported. The Pathet Lao have completed a week-long Central Committee meeting.	
NORTH VIETNAM	6
Hanoi intends to be flexible on recognition terms.	

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SOUTH VIETNAM

President Thieu directed government provincial chiefs on 1 March to prevent further "violent" demonstrations at compounds occupied by members of the International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS) and the four-power Joint Military Commission (JMC). Thieu pointed out in his order that the demonstrations were being cited by the Communists as evidence of South Vietnamese unwillingness to honor the cease-fire agreement.

The directive was prompted in part by the impasse over prisoner releases that developed last week from Communist assertions that such demonstrations were endangering their members of the JMC teams, and that they could not participate further in the cease-fire machinery in certain parts of the country until conditions improved. Thieu also was aware that the demonstrations were overshadowing the government's claims of Communist infiltration activity and cease-fire violations and were reflecting badly on the government's attitude toward the cease-fire agreement.

President Thieu told Ambassador Bunker that he has agreed to provide escorted tours of Saigon and surrounding areas for North Vietnamese delegates but would refuse similar treatment for the Viet Cong since "their delegates are from the South and know the area." He also said he would permit the Communist delegates in Saigon to hold a weekly press conference at their compound on Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Although the Communists probably will not immediately return their team members to posts in certain parts of the country, Thieu's new measures may help ease tension and smooth somewhat further prisoner release negotiations.

25X1

25X1

5 March 1973

More Fighting in the Highlands?

Both sides are engaged in military efforts that could lead to increased fighting in western Pleiku Province. Two North Vietnamese regiments are clearing land and building permanent bases near the Thanh An District capital. The government has reinforced its forces at Thanh An to guard against a Communist attack from Duc Co, a few miles to the west.

25X1

Third Force in the Limelight

The approach of the scheduled political talks between the Thieu government and the Viet Cong has triggered increased activity by potential "third force" aspirants. There are also signs that both Saigon and the Communists are becoming more interested in these elements.

One of those reportedly hoping to be selected as a member of the third segment in the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord (NCNRC), which is supposed to be set up by Saigon and the Viet Cong, is former emperor Bao Dai.

25X1

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Bao Dai left Paris in mid-February for Singapore where he was trying to obtain a South Vietnamese entry visa. The former emperor, who has been in exile for almost 20 years, apparently believes that his chances of being chosen for the NCNRC will improve if he is residing in South Vietnam rather than abroad. If permitted to return home, he hopes to establish a working relationship with Big Minh.

5 March 1973

25X1

25X1

[redacted]

For his part, Big Minh has called on the government to allow exiles to return, but there is no indication whether he would be willing to cooperate with Bao Dai.

[redacted]

25X1

[redacted] His earlier public statement that he would accept a leadership role if "the people" asked him apparently referred only to a new South Vietnamese government.

For years the Communists have been attempting to influence potential third force elements. Since the cease-fire, there have been several indications of their interest in the An Quang Buddhists. In addition,

25X1

[redacted] the Viet Cong are concerned about the influence of third force elements over which they have no control, citing a hypothetical Bao Dai - Big Minh - Ky combination.

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The Thieu government is keeping a close watch on possible third force elements. It reportedly has ordered its agents abroad to follow the movements of Bao Dai and undoubtedly is keeping track of other exiles as well. An independent Saigon paper recently reported that the government has selected two An Quang senators and two moderate opposition politicians to be among its candidates for the third segment of the NCNRC. There is no information to confirm this report, but it is plausible that President Thieu would try to have reasonably cooperative figures appointed as third force members of the council.

[redacted]

25X1

25X1

5 March 1973

25X1

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Seven Soviet ships trapped in Haiphong since last May departed between 2 and 4 March. With these departures, 18 foreign vessels have left the North Vietnamese port since the cease-fire went into effect on 28 January. All of the ships got under way before US naval units began clearing operations, strongly indicating that the North Vietnamese have managed to clear some mines from the main shipping channel on their own.

25X1
25X1

several Chinese minesweepers arrived in Haiphong last summer, and one of them was active in the mined areas during the late fall and winter.

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Nine foreign ships are still in North Vietnamese ports. Eight of these--three Soviet, three Polish, one British, and one East German--are in Haiphong, and one Soviet vessel is at Cam Pha.

25X1

25X1

5 March 1973

[REDACTED]

LAOS

Field commanders on 4 and 5 March reported only minor contacts with the enemy. In the south, a Lao Army battalion about three miles from Paksong skirmished with a small Communist unit. The Lao Army commander in this area has begun to send teams into Paksong to determine enemy strength. At last report, there was little Communist activity in the town.

In the north, a brief clash southeast of Xieng Khouangville caused a few government casualties. General Vang Pao has ordered renewed T-28 strikes in retaliation for recent attacks in this sector and is preparing to move some 400 additional troops to shore up his defenses near Route 4. [REDACTED]

25X1

Communists Ready to Go

The Lao Communists may be ready to get down to business in working out the details of the peace agreement. The Pathet Lao central committee in Sam Neua has completed a week-long meeting to map the next steps in negotiations. According to a Communist spokesman, leading negotiator Phoune Sipraseuth will return to Vientiane on 6 March. [REDACTED]

25X1

5 March 1973

NORTH VIETNAM

[redacted]

[redacted] Hanoi would welcome ties with countries already having relations with Saigon. [redacted]

[redacted] the North Vietnamese would not necessarily reject out of hand the idea of joint recognition of Saigon and the PRG, and "might even settle for de facto recognition" of the PRG by countries having relations with Saigon. After the scheduled elections are held [redacted] the Communists would expect such countries to recognize formally the government formed by the elections.

25X1

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Hanoi's apparent flexibility on the PRG recognition issue reflects its somewhat ambiguous position on this matter. Hanoi apparently feels that:

- Increased international recognition would enhance the PRG's legitimacy inside and outside Vietnam.
- It should, however, avoid publicly formalizing the existence of two competing governments in the South when the Communists' proclaimed goal is the quick formation of a unified government of "national conciliation" for all South Vietnam.
- Few governments are likely to recognize the PRG in view of its lack of the normal attributes of nationhood, i.e., a clearly defined territory, capital, and government.

5 March 1973

25X1

[REDACTED]

Thus Hanoi shows no inclination to tailor its own diplomatic efforts to the PRG recognition question, although it does pick up opportunities such as the just-concluded Paris conference to proclaim the PRG's legitimacy. Far more important to Hanoi is its own campaign for diplomatic recognition, and it has avoided placing other countries into difficult "either-or" situations involving the two South Vietnamese competitors.

[REDACTED]

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25X1

5 March 1973

-7-

25X1